DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 027 639 EA 002 096

By-Dexheimer, Roy

The Ethics of Chief School Administrators: A Study of Accommodation.

Pub Date Feb 69

Note-8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Amer. Assn. of School Admin. (101st, Atlantic City, N.J., Feb. 15-19, 1969).

EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.50

Descriptors-Administrator Characteristics, *Ethical Values, Individual Characteristics, *Integrity, *Public Schools, *School Superintendents

To investigate a possible gap between the outward acceptance of the AASA Code of Ethics and the individual members' internal or even public adherence to the Code, questionnaires containing 15 anecdotal situations which might face any typical school administrator were sent to 444 chief school administrators. A separate sheet solicited autobiographical information. Two hundred and forty-two responded. The results showed more nonethical than ethical responses. Replies based on actual experience (55 percent) were two to one, ethical to nonethical, while those based upon theoretical responses had an equal ethical-nonethical ratio. Other notable results were that (1) respondent's age was not a significant factor; (2) the humanities majors of undergraduate years had relatively low (nonethical) scores; (3) ethical responses were negatively related to career longevity; (4) AASA membership, religious convictions, and graduate studies in ethical behavior were not significant factors; and (5) salary and size of district were positively related to ethical responses. It is concluded that ethical standards are internalized personally and are not affected by public code, no matter how important such codes are to maintain public image. (HW)

THE ETHICS OF CHIEF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS: A STUDY OF ACCOMMODATION*

by Roy Dexheimer, Superintendent
Batavia City Schools
Batavia, New York

> "So long as a businessman complies with the laws of the land and avoids telling malicious lies, he's ethical. If the law as written gives a man a wide-open chance to make a killing, he'd be a fool not to take advantage of it.. If he doesn't, somebody else will. There's no obligation on him to stop and consider who is going to get hurt. If the law says he can do it, that's all the justification he needs. There's nothing unethical about that."

That statement was written by Albert Carr in a 1968 article about the ethics of businessmen, published in the Harvard Business Review. This definition is, we hope, foreign to the concept of ethics in a profession, because a prominent tenet in any definition of a profession is that it have an enforceable code of ethics. Otherwise the public may not perceive the group as being professional. One can only assume that the American Association of School Administrators was so motivated when, after nearly a hundred years of existance, it promulgated a Code of Ethics in 1962.

Let me retreat from this opening line of thought just for a minute. When I was a chief school administrator in a rural school district, I confess to giving little or no attention to ethics as a separate entity, although I certainly hope my administrative behavior was ethical. Last year I returned to the University of Rochester for a final year of graduate study. One day, almost casually, I mentioned in a seminar how odd it was we talked so often about the mechanics of administering people and things, but how little we investigated the ethical implications of such administration. The professor gave what can best be described as a snort of derision. Other members of the seminar group felt almost embarassed by the open mention of ethical behavior, as if a naughty word had been uttered.

*Paper presented at the American Association of School Administrators Annual Meeting (Atlantic City, N.J., Feb. 15-19, 1969).

EA 002 096

One peer even indicated that any talk of ethics in administrative behavior was irrelevant!

As is often the case in graduate studies, I discovered that the profeesor was putting me on, daring me to defend or to retreat from my observation. He eventually led me to a book entitled Lawyer's Ethics: A Survey of the New York City Bar, by the distinguished lawyer-sociologist Jerome Carlin.

In 1965-66 Professor Carlin conducted an exhaustive and ingenius study of the New York City Bar Association and its Code of Ethics. His goal was to discover the relationship between the outward acceptance of this code and the actual adherance to it. Carlin's methodology was to get at actual ethical behavior through a combination of depth interviews and a questionnaire. This approach was determined after ruling out direct observations (too time-consuming), informants (too unreliable), and the official records of misconduct (too few infractions ever saw print). His approach depended upon the candor of his respondents as they replied to his questions about thirteen borderline ethical situations which were likely to face any lawyer in the normal duties of his profession.

The conclusions were illuminating. Lawyers, at least in the New York City Bar Association, were barely honest in many instances, let alone ethical. There was a material descrepancy between the ethical standards that lawyers acknowledged were binding upon them and the standards of conduct that many of them observed in fact. Further, the deviations from ethical standards of conduct were not significantly inhibited by formal devices for fostering compliance; i.e., the official sanctions of the Bar Association itself. The Association really punished only those offenses which transgressed upon societal morality, and not the ethical breaches of professional standards as outlined in its own code of ethics.

Back from these digressions to the American Association of School Administrators and its Code of Ethics.

A report given to this Convention a year ago indicated that only thirty-two states had active Ethics Committees; only five states were investigating or in some way acting upon a case involving a violation of ethics; only two states had officially adopted the AASA Code of Ethics as a state guideline; and generally, most states had no significant activities to report in 1967.

In another AASA report, the 1960 Profile of the School Superintendent, the superintendents surveyed never once listed ethical behavior as one of the qualifications for an effective school administrator, nor did the report ever list the study of ethics in its discussion of pre-service and in-service programs for chief school administrators.

In short, it is possible that the same situation Carlin discovered among New York City lawyers might be prevalent among chief school administrators; viz., that despite serious professional concern on the part of AASA for the ethical behavior of its members, there could be a relatively wide gap between the outward acceptance of the AASA Code of Ethics and the individual member's internal or even public adherance to that Code.

These conclusions became the basis of a study I conducted this past fall. A questionnaire was devised containing fifteen anecdotal situations which might face any typical school administrator sometime in the course of his career. Each of the anecdotes was based upon some statement in the AASA Code of Ethics; e.g., accepting gifts from vendors, hiring one's spouse in the district, and so forth.

With each anecdote went a range of answers, including the option of writing in a completely different answer if none of the choices was relevant. Also, the respondent was to indicate whether or not his response was based upon an actual experience in his career, or if the answer selected was only what he might do in theory if ever faced with the situation. Finally, the range of answers offered

contained one--sometimes two--replies which corresponded almost exactly with the course of action which is clearly a part of the AASA Code of Ethics.

With this questionnaire went a single sheet asking for some autobiographical information. The respondents were asked about their age; the major field of study as an undergraduate; the number of years as chief school administrator in the present district; and the number of years totally as a chief school administrator; what position did they hold immediately prior to becoming a chief school administrator, and was that position in the current district or elsewhere; the size of the school district in numbers of students; a general statement on the strength of religious convictions; a question about frequency of attendance at AASA Conventions such as this one; the salary for 1968-69; and finally, whether or not the graduate training had contained any special attention directed toward the ethical implications of administrative decisions.

The sampling technique was very simple: I took the 1967 Roster of Members, and selected the first superintendent on each page. Since the Rosteris divided by states, this guaranteed geographical distribution. In an attempt to elicit candor, complete anonumity was guaranteed. No code numbers were used, no signatures were asked. An extremely supportive covering letter was attached, signed by Forrest Connor and Steve Knesevich. I also had a letter of explanation, and I enclosed a self-addressed and stamped envelope for returning the responses.

Two hundred and forty-two replies were received, out of a grand total of four hundred and forty-four mailed questionnaires. Although personal anonymity was assured, I did keep a rough tabulation of postmarks; thus I can assert positively that all fifty states were represented in the final tabulation.

One final bit of background information, and then to some findings. The first and most obvious fault to find in this research design is that respondents

might not be candid. The supposition here is that only the most ethical answer will be selected, and not the one which reflects actual behavior. Partly to answer this argument, and partly to sharpen the questionnaire itself, I conducted a pilot study among fifteen chief school administrators known to me personally. Their replies were completely candid, believe me! No man picked more than twelve ethical answers. When the same questionnaire was given to a group of graduate students, who were instructed to select the answers they thought to be most ethical and not what they actually would do, no respondent got less than seventeen ethical replies (there were twenty items on the pilot questionnaire). The pilot study and the results I am about to describe from the national study seem to indicate candor, if nothing else.

The results of the final questionnaire were interesting. More non-ethical responses were made than ethical responses. The mean score of ethical responses for the entire group of respondents was 7.1, out of a possible score of 15.

Over 55% of the responses were based upon actual experiences. One nice result here: the replies based upon actual experience were almost 2 - 1, ethical to non-ethical responses. Among the replies based upon theoretical responses, the ethical -- non-ethical ratio was equal. The significance of this escapes, unless it is that we are more ethical in actual practice than we are when only guessing what we might do in any given situation.

You'll remember that each respondent was asked to give some autobiographical information. This information was matched against the replies on the questionnaire. Here are some quick overviews of the results of that analysis:

1) age of the respondent has no significant bearing upon the responses
2) the humanities majors of undergraduate years had relatively low mean scores -- 6.2, vs. the 7.1 mean of the whole group. Hooray for philosophy!

3) longevity in the present job had no significance, but career longevity did. The longer one is a chief school administrator, apparently, the lower the number of ethical responses.

4) I asked what job was held prior to the superintendency, and whether or not this job had been in the current or another district. The only interesting sidelights here were these: coaches from other districts were not very good on sportsmanship, because their mean score was pretty low. The highest number of ethical responses was in the group I termed "outsiders" — men who moved into the superintendency from jobs that ranged from payroll clerk to college president.

5) membership in AASA, religious convictions, and graduate studies in ethical behavior did not produce any significant deviations from the group mean of 7.1.

6) finally, two bits of autobiographical information did yield very interesting and statistically significant results. In an almost straight-line progression, the size of the district and the amount of salary did show marked differences. That is, the smaller the district and the lower the pay, the lower the mean number of ethical replies. And conversely, the men responding from the largest districts and/or the men with the best salaries clearly had the greatest number of ethical replies.

Let me offer some concluding remarks. First, remember that this is only a graduate student's study, subject to all the limitations that term implies. There is so much that could be faulted in this or any other questionnaire study that the results must be looked at with a skeptical eye.

Still, it's <u>startling</u> to find more non-ethical replies than ethical replies.

It's interesting to note the variations in replies. It's significant that the foremost leaders in our profession -- i.e., those who are in the largest districts and who are recognized by the status of high salaries -- are the most ethical among us. It's important to note that ethical responses on a questionnaire are no measure at all of a chief school administrator's effectiveness. The least ethical among us may accomplish the most good.

There is some question, especially in terms of contemporary thought on ethical behavior, whether or not codified rules of conduct have any real effect upon the behavior of human beings. For example:

> A committee set up by the late President Kennedy to deal with questions of business ethics, of which the writer of this book was a member, got nowhere at all because it was code-minded, wrote a code to cover all business, and found itself possessed of nothing but platitudes. (Fletcher, 1966, p. 138)

Yet the public seems to put faith in such codes, and wants guidelines of some type:

> .....in almost every chapter of a study reporting ethical issues in a number of occupations, the participants voiced their longing for ethical guidance in their particular vocational problems. The incontrovertible fact is that many must ever be protected against the human propensity to seek one's own advantage. It is at this point that the forces of ethics and religion make their contribution to the well-being of society. (Obenhaus, 1965, pp. 222-231)

Ethical philosophies from Aristotle to Phenix, Barnard, and Maslow have all indicated that the real source of ethical behavior exists within the individual and not in any code of ethics. A major writer in the field of educational administration has agreed:

> Equally as important as the possession of desirable character attributes for the educational administrator is the possession of a value framework upon which these attributes are based. George S. Counts once proposed

> that the major sources of American values are found in the Hebraic-Christian ethic, the humanistic spirit, the scientific method, faith in the rule of the law, and faith in democracy.....in other words, as a prospective administrator, one should be able to translate this system into action as he faces the many moral and ethical decisions which will occur both on and off off the job. (Campbell, et al., 1958, p. 301)

My study has tried to focus some attention on the possibilities of adherance to the professional AASA Code of Ethics being something less than their apparent acceptance, and also to highlight some of the variables which might affect that adherance.

The study has not attempted to make judgment on how adherance might be fostered. Greater emphasis upon ethics in preservice training, perhaps through simulation materials, is one possibility. Stronger sanction for the AASA Code of Ethics, plus a greater willingness to enforce this sanction might bring about more adherance. Some high-powered public relations techniques in pointing out the salient features of the Code of Ethics are methods which might be explored.

Whatever the road to be selected, this study seems to have reinforced what philosophers from Aristotle to Phenix have stressed: ethical standards are internalized personally, and are not determined by public codes, no matter how important such codes are to maintain the public image of any profession. Perhaps the only code of ethics possible was expressed by Philip Phenix - "if the consequences of the act are good, the act is right; if they are evil, the act is wrong. Good, not right, becomes primary."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.